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ABSTRACT

There has been much debate in composition studies about authority in the postmodern writing classroom. A redefinition of "authority" for the postmodern writing classroom necessitates a careful analysis of all those sets of relations which factor into the teacher-student relationship, and an awareness that authority is contingent, reprocessing itself daily based on teacher-student interaction. "Authority" is a relation, a locus of continuous revisitation of the teacher-student relationship, and this revisitation is in itself inherently ethical and should compel the teacher of writing to use a variety of pedagogical discourse models to enhance this relation. A comprehensive approach based upon a combination of discourse models--including ethical, feminist, and masculine-authoritative, among others--will best serve the composition instructor in regard to classroom teaching practice. If a comprehensive approach is adopted--it already has been in the best composition classrooms--the term "authority" will come to signify a locus, a relation of mutual respect and shared responsibility involving student and teacher. Hopefully, teachers of college composition will not compromise their students' education to meet the dubious exigencies of personal and/or institutional bias. English teachers should be helping students change their lives for the better--in an ethical as well as a materialistic sense. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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Redefining "Authority" for the Postmodern Writing Classroom: Making a Case for an Ethics of Instruction

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"What worries me . . . is the widespread neglect of the concern [about] how to *teach* ethical reading and writing--how "English," whatever we call it, can 'change students in ways that are most useful to them.'"
--Wayne Booth

There has been much debate in Composition Studies about authority in the postmodern writing classroom. This essay will focus on one aspect of the debate, the ethics of authority, and redefine "authority" on that basis. In an ethical context, "authority" is marked by the transactional nature of the teacher-student relationship, and everything pertaining to that relationship: the teacher's personal ethos, teaching effectiveness, assessment, affective response, and so forth. As a result, a redefinition of "authority" for the postmodern writing classroom necessitates a careful analysis of all those sets of relations which factor into the teacher-student relationship, and an awareness that authority is contingent, reprocessing itself daily based on teacher-student interaction. In what follows, I will argue that "authority" is a relation, a locus of continuous revisitation of the teacher-student relationship, that this revisitation is in itself inherently ethical, and, as a result, should compel the teacher of writing to use a variety of pedagogical discourse models to enhance this relation.

The American poet George Oppen exemplified socio-historical shifts in authority in twentieth-century America in the poem "Philai Te Kou Philai" (1970). Interestingly enough, Oppen chose a high school or college teacher as the authority figure in the poem, which opens like this:

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There is a portrait by Eakins
Of the intellectual, a man
Who might be a school teacher
Shown with the utmost seriousness, a masculine drama
In the hardness of his black shoes, in the glitter
Of his eyeglasses and his firm stance--
How have we altered! As Charles said
Rowing on the lake
In the woods, "if this were the country
The nation, if these were the routes through it--"

How firm the man is
In that picture
Tho pedagogic.
This was his world. (75)

This opening clearly depicts the masculine authority that dominated the American scene--particularly as it manifested itself in both public and private schools--through the late 1960's, and that continues to exert influence today. Notably, the masculine authority model subsumes women who have bought into masculine-authoritative discourse, for the figure of the school teacher in the poem represents a psychological predisposition toward action in the world rather than any difference based upon gender. Be that as it may, the poem announces that Americans *have altered,* and that they are far less certain about how to deal with contemporary social issues because, unlike forty years earlier, they are far less certain about the complex, shifting nature of contemporary American society and the American psyche: " 'if this were the country/

The nation, if these were the routes through it, ' " Oppen's speaker declaims, but with this telltale sign: *Indeed, it is not!* Because of the growing complexity of American life, masculine-authoritative discourse alone--based as it is upon prescription, demand and sanction--cannot deal effectively with the growing complexity of American life and has begun to give way to newer discourses that have developed in response to a changed American scene.

Despite its demise in emphasis and status, the masculine-authority model has something to offer the contemporary writing instructor. The model could not have perpetuated itself for centuries unless it dealt directly with important aspects of the educational process--but more on this later.

The displacement of masculine-authoritative discourse in English education coincides with changes in Composition Studies which began in the early 1970's when ethical and feminist discourse models began to appear. These, in turn, were fueled by earlier studies in the philosophy of moral education, and in the nascent rumblings of a feminine ethics which produced the groundbreaking ethical studies of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings in the early 1980's: "In developing an ethics and a moral education of care Noddings relies on such Buberian concepts as encounter, inclusion, I-Thou relationships, receptivity, reciprocity and the role of the teacher" (Elias 55). Today, ethical and feminist discourse models for composition instruction, and the intersection of feminist discourses and personal-narrative discourses, shed new light on the writing process and the importance of student-teacher relations to that process. Both ethical and feminist discourse models highlight the personal: teachers provide caring, effective instruction while committing themselves to engaging students in a dynamic learning experience. Nationally, across university and college curriculums, this pedagogical model has become the preferred one, especially in liberal studies, hu-

manities and honors programs.

The highlighting of the personal moves me to the crux of this essay: redefining "authority" in terms of ethics. Because student recruiting and retention costs continue to rise, several recent studies have examined how students are effectively integrated into university academic environments. In the summer of 1992 Karen O'Neill and William Todd-Mancillas published one such study in which they had "asked 52 students at California State University, Chico, to recall the development of their relationships with their instructors in terms of key 'turning points' that either enhanced or detracted from their learning experiences." Student responses were grouped into five categories under the following headings:

1. Character of the Instructor
2. Learning Climate Created by the Instructor
3. Course Administrative Style
4. Rhetorical Sensitivity of the Instructor
5. Professional Feedback

In general, these findings make some universally-held points about good and bad teaching, and they also indicate the effectiveness of ethical and feminist discourse models to teaching while coming down hard on the masculine-authoritative model. For example, students reacted negatively to an authoritarian approach, when the instructor appeared "cold or uncaring," or proved "unwilling to acknowledge" student opinion. Conversely, students reacted positively to helpful, caring teachers who were willing to engage student opinion and acknowledge its worth (1).

These key turning points indicate respect or lack thereof for the authority figure in the classroom. In a nut shell, students respect teachers who respect them, and they hold their teachers responsible in the most important categories of instruction:

competence, ethos, learning climate, course management, social skills and assessment. O'Neill and Todd-Mancilla found that students wanted knowledgeable, articulate instructors who could provide them with "constructive feedback." They wanted organized instructors who "manag[ed] classroom administrative duties efficiently and effectively" and who made and kept office hours and appointments. Students also wanted unbiased grading, and stated that they could detect instructor bias "against certain students." In one case, two students believed than an instructor "[gave] higher grades to students of one major over students in another" (1).

In my experience, for example, students in first-year college composition classes may not always know exactly how their work is assessed, but they are very capable of detecting fairness or bias in grading. They also know whether their writing is improving or not, and whether the instructor uses writing strategies that facilitate improvement. Writing instruction that emphasizes rhetorical context, continuous revision, careful use of detailed, dignostic tracking charts in grading, and focused, applied grammar instruction can effectively relieve student anxiety concerning writing improvement and grading. Such instruction is inherently interdisciplinary in nature because, among other disciplines, it relies on the research of applied linguistics and educational psychology (e.g. behavior modification and long-term memory-retention strategies) to effect writing improvement. In other words, the most effective English instructors use their knowledge of related disciplines to enhance their teaching and effect improvement in student writing. It is worthwhile to speculate about the number of college-composition instructors who are knowledgeable of interdisciplinary approaches to the teaching of college composition, and, secondly, who apply that knowledge in their teaching. The authoritarian writing instructor, prone to problems of ego and status, may very well resist any approach that differs from his or hers.

At this point, I will ask a few questions that might appear to be rhetorical. Shouldn't students attend class on a regular basis to learn to write more effectively? Shouldn't all students complete all writing assignments to the best of their abilities, whether it be a writing-to-learn assignment, a grammar module, a 500-word essay or a research paper? Shouldn't writing assignments be completed on time, and be penalized if they are not? Shouldn't students write their own papers and complete their own assignments in a student culture plagued by plagiarism? Shouldn't students be willing to learn to paraphrase and summarize effectively since so many of them are sadly deficient in these important basic writing skills? These questions are rhetorical if one assumes ideal student responses. In most cases, however, students responses vary, and quite often are premised on expediency.

To my knowledge, holding students responsible for their work has not been a penchant of some contemporary models of instruction. For example, in a recent review of three new books about feminism, the personal and personal narrative, Mariolina Salvatori criticized Nancy K. Miller's classroom practice in *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and other Autobiographical Acts* for lack of rigor: as teacher and students became more personable, more friendly, the "learner's responsibility and right to produce and receive critique" diminished. "And so," Salvatori states, "in the 'Teaching Autobiography' classroom, the recitation of one's life produces and is echoed by another recitation, and another, in a responsorial mode that excludes as much as it includes, since it seems to be based on congruence and affinity of thoughts, feelings, positions" (570). In a course meant to produce "good feelings," serious course responsibilities appeared lacking.

The virtue of the masculine-authoritative model is that it rewards student who effectively meet course requirements, and penalizes those who don't. In a word,

assessment is rigorous and holds students accountable to a performance standard. This is the up side of the model; we all know the down side--especially as it involves issues of power in the student-teacher relationship.

In sum, a comprehensive approach based upon a combination of discourse models--including ethical, feminist and masculine-authoritative, among others--will best serve the composition instructor in regard to classroom teaching practice. If a comprehensive approach is adopted--it already has been in the best composition classrooms--the term "authority" will come to signify a locus, a relation of mutual respect and shared responsibility involving student and teacher. A narrow approach "lacks authority" in the best sense of the term because it is exclusive, thus calling into question the knowledge (i.e. the authority) of the instructor since such instruction lacks dimension and depth. In most cases, narrow approaches work to the detriment of writing students. Need the reader be reminded that Aristotle was emphatic in his *Rhetoric* that the most important of the three appeals to the orator (teacher) was the ethical one, and that this appeal was based completely on the nature of the orator's discourse in relation to the sophistication of his or her audience (17)?

The move to inclusiveness signaled by the writing instructor's ability to assimilate multiple teaching discourses in crafting a comprehensive approach to instruction reminds me of a passage in Wallace Stevens' "Notes to a Supreme Fiction" where the narrator stresses the importance of openness and making correct choices:

> He had to choose. But it was not a choice
> Between excluding things. It was not a choice
> Between, but of. He chose to include the things
> That in each other are included, the whole,

The complicate, the amassing harmony. (403)

Like Stevens' narrator, I hope college composition instructors will not "choose between, but of" when it comes to making important choices about how best to effect student writing improvement. Metaphorically, one would like to think of writing improvement as an "amassing harmony," but an amassing harmony which literally signals the positive reconstituting of the whole person through the appeal of language as a means of developing writing/thinking skills.

Recently, I read an account of teaching in the late Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* which gets [illegible] "authority" in the postmodern writing classroom. In the chapter titled "The Idea of Excellence," Reading expresses his deepening frustration at seeing North American universities being transformed into "transnational corporations" whose rhetorics of "excellence," "quality" and "academic freedom" betray what is really going on in higher education: the turning of knowledge into a commodity which is sold to student consumers at the highest competitive price as universities jockey to meet their financial goals (21-32). Readings concludes that "[t]he social responsibility of the University, its accountability to society, is solely a matter of services rendered for a fee. Accountability is a synonym for accounting . . ." (32). Furthermore, a price tag has been put on quality instruction while the issue of quality course content has, in many cases, been ignored if not downright discouraged.

Against these financial considerations driving higher education in North America, Readings argues that "the goal of education" is the development of independent, self-sufficient persons; however, since this independence is qualified by the constraints imposed upon citizens by modern nation states, Readings believes that teaching should in some way mirror the ethical obligations of those citizens to one

another. As a result, he envisions pedagogy in terms of ethical relations involving teachers and students:

> In place of the lure of autonomy, of independence from all obligation, I want to insist that pedagogy is a relation, a network of obligation. In this sense, we might want to talk of the teacher as *rhetor* rather than *magister*, one who speaks in a rhetorical context rather than one whose discourse is self-authorizing. The advantage here would be to recognize that the legitimation of the teacher's discourse is not immanent to that discourse
>
> reception. The *rhetor* is a speaker who takes account of the audience, while the *magister* is indifferent to the specificity of his or her addressees. (158)

Not surprisingly, Readings adopts Aristotle's position on ethics in the *Rhetoric* when making a case for an ethics of instruction across the disciplines. In redefining "authority" for the postmodern writing classroom, I have really been making a case for an ethics of instruction in just one of these disciplines, college composition. Both Readings and I have made inquiries into the truth of what constitutes effective instruction, and have come up with some answers, but how far these answers/truths go--in terms of convincing, then persuading teachers to reform actual classroom practice--involves issues of educational politics rather than pedagogical truthtelling because "in society, knowledge is constantly compromised with power" (qtd. in Readings, *Introducing Lyotard*). Hopefully, teachers of college composition will not compromise their students' educations to meet the dubious exigencies of personal and/or institutional bias. English teachers should be helping students change their lives for the better--in an ethical as well as a materialistic sense (Booth 42-45).

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